Sustain our People

Block 4 Report (12/14/22)

Co-chairs: Mike Siddoway and Mark Lee
Participants: Carrie Ruiz; Sofia Fenner; Andrea Bruder; Klay Matlock; Judson Thomas; Victoria Rosa

The numbered items below list the major themes that have emerged from our gatherings with CC community members over the last 19 months and in “Sustain our People” working group discussions this fall. While we hope to make advances in each of these critical areas, we also must clearly convey the most telling and consistent response we’ve heard throughout this process. Time and again colleagues related that “the College” could better listen to, and better respect employees. This implies more than “thanking,” as important and essential as that is.

The college needs to act on its respect for employees and what it hears from them. This can involve time, monetary compensation, and meaningful progression designs, but goes beyond these critical aspects of an organization’s acknowledgment of excellence and dedication. Many colleagues were dismayed when not asked to contribute to areas of concern that directly relate to their work. The perception is that “outsiders” are deemed better positioned to solve our most pressing problems. Our review processes have grown to be more and more rote and distant. Faculty salary letters, for instance, don’t reflect any recognition of what the person has actually done in the time of the review, and we commonly heard that faculty and staff members received no or little feedback at the conclusion of salary reviews. Appointment letters are anodyne and impersonal. It hasn’t always been so. This all points to the perception of a growing and ever more hardened divide between the administration and the rest of the college.

At the heart of what we heard from across the College throughout Project 2024’s gatherings with community members over the past 20 months:

The College needs to make a resolute effort to listen and act on the community's concerns. Such a commitment would support thriving and greatly improve campus climate.

Here are the major “Sustaining our People” themes that surfaced over the last three semesters.

1) Living Wage for all CC employees and contract workers

- Offer competitive pay
- Create a plan over a reasonable number of years to offer a living wage to all those employed at the college (including those contracted by the college)
- Require CFO to prioritize a living wage for all employees and contract workers.
- Review whether open positions need to be filled or whether there are other ways to meet the needs/goals of a department/office, e.g., by using technology to create efficiencies.
- Stress that all campus constituencies have a role to play in achieving a living wage for all.
- Re-allocate funds to increase salary fund
- Cost-of-living adjustment, especially for those most vulnerable in our community
- Comprehensive review of benefits with focus on equity
- In the mid-80’s several elite universities announced plans to work toward a living wage. This list includes Harvard, Swarthmore, Princeton, Wesleyan, University of Virginia, Johns Hopkins, Brown, Stanford, American University, Earlham College, American University/George Washington School of Law, Fairfield University, and the University of Tennessee. This can be a long process, but many of these schools (see Swarthmore below) have made great strides toward being a Living Wage Employer.
- In 2020, the University of Arkansas announced a commitment to phase in a living wage for all university employees. Canada’s Simon Frazer University recently announced that it will strive to be a certified Living Wage Employer. Many universities in the UK are going in this direction too.
- The (AASHE) STARS rating system that CC participates in has an “employment compensation” component. Here are links to the (short) summaries for this category from CC and two other liberal arts colleges
  - Colorado College: https://reports.aashe.org/institutions/colorado-college-co/report/2021-03-05/PA/wellbeing-work/PA-12/
  - Carleton College: https://reports.aashe.org/institutions/carleton-college-mn/report/2021-03-05/PA/wellbeing-work/PA-12/
  - Swarthmore College: https://reports.aashe.org/institutions/swarthmore-college-pa/report/2020-03-06/PA/wellbeing-work/PA-12/
- In these reports three institutional responses summarize commitments to a living wage:
- Percentage of employees that receive a living wage (benefits excluded):
  - CC 85%, Carleton 100%, Swarthmore 100%
- Percentage of employees of on-site contractors known to receive a living wage or be covered by collective bargaining agreements (i.e., union contracts):
  - CC 11%, Carleton 85%, Swarthmore 100%
- Has the institution made a formal commitment to pay a living wage?: All three colleges answer the last question “yes,” as do many institutions surveyed by AASHE. Do these formal commitments differ? What do formal
commitments look like for other schools that answer “yes” to this question? For a local point of reference, UCCS does not have a formal commitment to a living wage and claims to provide a living wage to 89% of its employees while reporting no contract workers.

2) A holistic approach to health and wellbeing to support thriving of all campus community members

Let’s go beyond sustaining and create a work environment that fosters thriving. We applaud the recent decision to elevate the status of Mental Health to a campus initiative. Recognizing that mental and physical health are inseparably interconnected and impact one another, we encourage a holistic approach including Physical Health in a similar way.

- **Mental Health**
  Rely on internal expertise and student, faculty, and staff input to meet student needs for mental health support. We fully support existing plans and add the items below.
  - Address mental health concerns for both students who are generally healthy but struggling with situational stress and for students with mental illness.
  - Make resources available via a website for students, staff, and faculty, similar to the Berkeley one-click resources for students, faculty, and staff – an innovative idea, part of the Berkeley re-calibrate initiative.
  - Reduce stress. Consider:
    - No-grade option for students.
    - Allow faculty to “drop” a small number of course evaluations from tenure/promotion reviews. Reduce stress and incentivize experimentation with innovative pedagogies.
    - All supervisors encourage their team members to take breaks (e.g., lunch breaks, holidays). Some staff felt pressured not to take breaks or work during holidays, which elevated stress levels.

- **Physical Health**
  - Respiratory infections, including but not limited to COVID-19, influenza, RSV, are by far the most common infectious diseases on college campuses and affect students, faculty, and staff alike. For example, in 2021, more than 60% of CC students were impacted and missed class time, experienced classes taught on Zoom, and/or got less out of their classes than they could have had they, their classmates, and/or their instructors stayed healthy. Like athletes who improve their performance the most if they work their weaknesses, we gain the most in terms of health and productivity if we work this greatest source of (physical) illness. Investing in physical health also supports mental health, as people who are (physically) healthy are more able to tend to their mental health needs and are more likely to thrive. Pathogens causing respiratory illness accumulate in poorly ventilated indoor spaces and can be removed from indoor air by improving
ventilation of buildings. We recommend a shift toward CC taking responsibility for healthy work environments.

- Review of ventilation systems can be led by community members with relevant expertise. Many effective measures are also cost-effective, and buildings can be simultaneously green and healthy. Follow the recommendations of the Harvard Healthy Buildings Program.
- Verify ventilation performance by gathering CO2 data. Some spaces are already well ventilated. Results help to allocate resources efficiently.
- Ensure that all event organizers pay attention to ventilation, so that attendees don’t have to (reducing stress, improving mental health).
- Empower people to make good health decisions
  - Install CO2 sensors (DIA is doing this, and people will be familiar soon!)
  - Commit to keeping the campus community well-informed about COVID-19, including impact from long-COVID, and general ILI (influenza-like illness) landscape
- Pandemic preparedness – plan for the next pandemic now to avoid scrambling when it occurs.
  - Reconceptualize sick leave as health leave. According to the existing policy, staff may already take up to 3 days per fiscal year off unrelated to illness.
- Make more legible the activities health leave can be used for and actively encourage employees to take health leave.
- Explore ways to incentivize people to take health leave.
- Consider increasing the number of yearly health leave days where possible (in concert with other possible schedule changes, see below).

- **Explore a 4-day work week**
  Studies generated mounting evidence that people tend to be more productive and innovative when a four-day work week was implemented.
  - Consider the following range of options: A 4-day work week. One or two 4-day work weeks per month.
  - From Karen Whitney’s blog: “Preliminary responses reported in higher education outlets such as the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside HigherEd, etc. […] indicate that increasing flexible working conditions can lead to increased employee recruitment, increased employee retention, and increased productivity.” Consider four 10-hour workdays, or 4 9-hour days and a half-day and similar models as flexible options.
  - Related to the above: Tweak the calendar to allow employees/students to take holidays such as MLK Day, Labor Day, Juneteenth, etc. off.
  - Use existing tools such as Power Automate to automate repetitive tasks and free up time and increase the proportion of meaningful work.
Build trust by allowing a reasonable amount of remote work.

- Prioritize and focus on what’s truly important. Encourage people to do less. Declutter our lives.
  - Conduct work schedule experiments. Ask everyone on campus to work only 7 hours a day for one week. Encourage departments and teams to reflect on what they prioritized and how what was learned can inform how we prioritize.
  - Rethink approach to meetings and committee work
    - Determine how often each committee really needs to meet. Once, twice etc. per semester instead of blockly or more often.
    - More generally, move toward a more streamlined committee system that prioritizes faculty and staff work that can affect actual outcomes.
    - Consider a meeting-free week per block or a meeting-free day per week.
    - No meetings during lunch (consider noon-12:xx); schedule meetings at the end of the day instead (after 3:30 works for Science division); provide technical and normative support for asynchronous and remote meeting options, especially for faculty with young children.
  - Find ways to incentivize subtractive solutions
    - For faculty: Personnel/annual reviews could focus on the quality and impact of service, rather than the quantity of it.
    - For students: Encourage staff and faculty advisors to talk with students about extracurricular activities/work commitments/athletics and how they plan to balance those with their coursework.
    - For staff: Value staff expertise and actively seek input from staff about things that we can stop doing and how existing workflows can be improved.
  - Take inventory of all activities (lecture series, events, extracurriculars) and choose intentionally a smaller number of activities to focus on. Make it easy for departments to coordinate activities/lecture series. Make it harder to not coordinate, e.g., limit budgets or require special approval.
  - Consider replacing Fall Conference with a Spring Conference (all staff are able to attend after most students have left campus) and use it to plan, strategically, for the year ahead. Have only a small welcome back event at the beginning of the year.
  - Identify efficiencies to save time: Avoid duplication of work due to decentralization. For example, centralize events (and provide budget as to save time), classroom scheduling, etc.
  - Clarify expectations for faculty, students, and staff surrounding time spent on class activities (3pm cut-off, no assignments over breaks etc.)
  - Engage in a campus-wide discussion about supporting student athletes as teams become more competitive and athletic schedules more demanding
Develop community expectations for responding to email (e.g., within X business days etc.). Consider a No email after hours and on weekends policy.

3) Advancement & Growth
   • Identify and make legible career paths, re-classify positions as needed
     o Create or use existing organizational chart to outline lateral or other growth within the department or college for staff w/ requirements or milestones on how to achieve desired moves.
   • Develop promotion and advancement structures that reward achievement and experience.
     o Flat dollar raises
     o Merit based system depending on milestone anniversaries (5, 10, 15, etc.) that promote employee loyalty and retain institutional knowledge
     o Check-ins versus reviews, for employees to evaluate their happiness within their position- i.e- someone who wants to move into a better role, or someone who enjoys their job and doesn’t want to change positions or “move-up” but they do a stellar job in their current role.
   • Provide training to build skills and capacity
     o Currently, we do offer Excel @ CC and tuition assistance. Providing more advertisement on this compiled with legible career paths, as stated above, could help set our employees up for success in pursuing education in their desired career field
   • Follow best practices for career and skill development
     o Maintain work-life balances
     o Ask employee’s what they want
   • Hire from within whenever possible
   • Allow a reasonable amount of remote work

4) Simplify, tighten job descriptions/expectations
   • Enable CC workers to better manage their time, wellness and commitments both inside and outside of work:
   • Communicate through multiple mediums that it is acceptable to not respond to emails over the weekend or after hours, and that several day turn-around for email replies are perfectly normal and acceptable
     (Might be best to eliminate this subsection here as it pertains more closely to our number 2 section on health and wellbeing)
   • Prioritize and defend a worker’s right to do the job they were hired to do:
     -Utilize our internal human resources and expertise before outsourcing jobs/consultations/studies/surveys, etc. and offer compensation for doing extra
projects
(either monetary or time release from other duties)
- Have concrete and official job descriptions for staff positions so that they are set expectations regardless of who is in the supervising chair or directing HR. Make these job descriptions mandatory for each staff position.

- **Simplify expectations so that we can spend more time on what we were primarily hired to do:**
  - For faculty: liberate us from having meetings on a “blockly schedule” and transition to meetings per semesters. For example, many universities only have 1 faculty meeting per semester. This would mean reducing our faculty meetings to only 2 a year versus 8! This allows for more time to focus on teaching and research. Faculty meetings, FEC, CEC, and Department meetings do not need to occur on a block schedule.
  - For faculty serving as chairs in highly demanding committees (i.e. FEC) offer a few blocks off from teaching so they can focus on faculty governance.